

5-1978

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SELF-KNOWLEDGE: A TRUE TRAGEDY?

BY

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A THESIS  
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND  
IN CANDIDACY  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS  
IN FRENCH

MAY 1978

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SELF-KNOWLEDGE: A TRUE TRAGEDY?

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Date: April 5, 1978

## TABLE OF CONTENT

Chapter	Page
I. PREFACE	1
II. LIFE OF RACINE	3
III. RACINE'S DEBUT	9
<u>La Thébaidé</u>	9
<u>Alexandre Le Grand</u>	13
IV. BREAK WITH PORT-ROYAL	18
<u>Andromaque</u>	18
V. ASSAULT ON LOVE	24
<u>Britannicus</u>	24
VI. DEFEAT OF LOVE	30
<u>Bérénice</u>	30
VII. CONCLUSION	35
BIBLIOGRAPHY	38
VITA	39

## PREFACE

What is self-knowledge? Self-knowledge is knowing one's own real character, abilities, or worth and even more, as far as Racine is concerned, being able to live one's life according to this knowledge. The knowledge is not innate but is slowly and painfully acquired.

What is tragedy? Tragedy is a literary composition which excites pity and terror by a succession of unhappy events, and in which the leading character is brought by some passion to a catastrophe. It is very important to know what one means by tragedy for it plays an important role with self-knowledge. To attain self-knowledge the strong-willed must struggle against fate, sometimes by the divine forces, other times by the psychological forces. The culmination of the tragedy is usually death, caused by a flaw. This can however be in some sense resolved by the character's belated recognition and acceptance of fate. In

either case, self-knowledge always intensifies and is at times the necessary condition of tragedy.

This paper is intended to associate several characters who exhibit various degrees of self-knowledge in the following tragedies: La Thébaidé Ou Les Frères Ennemis, Alexandre Le Grand, Andromaque, Britannicus, and Bérénice. These plays were written at various stages of Racine's literary career, and there is in them a reflection of his life and the mood of his creative endeavors.

Also included is an analysis intended to assimilate certain factors which can be used to gauge the presence or lack of self-knowledge gained only through awareness and a great deal of struggle.

- LOVE as in Alexandre Le Grand
- HATE as in La Thébaidé
- LUSTFUL LOVE as in Andromaque
- UNREQUITED LOVE as in Britannicus
- DEFEAT OF LOVE as in Bérénice
- DUTY as Andromaque herself sees it
- DEATH as it is for those with and those without self-knowledge
- LIFE as it is for those with and those without self-knowledge

## LIFE OF RACINE

Jean Racine, born into an upper-bourgeois family, was baptized on December 22, 1639, in Ferté-Milon. The first two years of his life were carried out in a fairly normal fashion, but on January 29, 1641, Racine had his first harsh view of reality: his mother died while giving birth to his sister Marie. For the sake of the children, Racine's father, Jean, remarried, taking Madeline Vol as his wife on November 4, 1642. But after only three months, tragedy struck again: his father died. Unfortunately, the family which his father had tried so hard to keep together was separated. It is not known whether or not the stepmother was unable or unwilling to care for the children, but suitable homes had to be found. Jean and Marie were separated. Jean went to his paternal grandparents. Marie was more fortunate for she went to her rather rich maternal grandparents, the Scorins. But again tragedy struck. Barely ten years old, Jean saw his grandfather die and his grandmother return to Port-Royal des Champs, for she was unable financially to keep a private home. Racine followed her. For the next four years, Racine grew up in a Jansenist school where he studied Greek and was taught the Jansenistic beliefs. Racine was also profoundly influenced by the austere living of Port-Royal. This meant that he was taught, among other religious beliefs, that his life was predestined, and no matter what he did his destiny depended upon God and not on the good or the bad acts that he performed. After four years of study he was sent to Paris to study at the Collège de Beauvais for two

years. After his studies were completed there, he returned to Port-Royal for another three years of Jansenistic teachings. He had a very good mind and his tutors enjoyed teaching him. He learned not only the Jansenistic teachings but had tutors who were knowledgeable in the field of Greek literature; in fact, he read a great deal from Plato and Plutarch. He also had one tutor who guided him in logic, astuteness and mental dexterity. He was taught not only in French, but also in Latin, Greek, Spanish, and Italian. It was during these years that Racine began to take a great interest in nature; he was deeply moved by her beauty and began composing verses celebrating it. At this point Racine's life was still simple for he had not yet complicated it with a need for success.

Upon his departure from Port-Royal, he went to study in Paris at the Collège d'Harcourt where he studied philosophy (a course similar to our Liberal Arts). After his year at the Collège, he went to live in the home of his cousin Nicolas Vitart, also situated in Paris. This was his first experience with social life. Here he broadened his outlook on life. Nicolas and his wife were active and social, and they took a great interest in Racine's ambitions as a writer. The Vitart home was frequented by many poets and other authors and this enabled Racine to make another important friend, Abbé Le Vasseur. He, too, encouraged Racine in his endeavor.

Paris became his land of enchantment. At the age of twenty, Racine was handsome, brilliant, and very poised. But he was



lacking that which was most important in seventeenth century society: social class and money. So, for the moment, he had no future. He reviewed all the possibilities. He could return to Ferté-Milon and get a down-to-earth job through his friend and cousin, Nicolas Vitart, or even a position in the army, although that was something which he could not afford. No doubt, the possibilities seemed rather dull to him and what he really wanted to do was to return to Paris. So this he did, and once he was there, he was determined to follow a literary career. After all, he was already an author of sorts. He had written odes, poems and some songs. His first ode that was published was "La Nympe de la Seine," and for this Racine received some one hundred lours.

When Racine wrote his first play, Amasie, it was politically rejected. The Jansenists expressed their displeasure over his choice of a literary career. After all, it was fine to translate hymns, but to write plays and odes to Marie-Thérèse was sinful. They even threatened excommunication. This was a bit confusing to him since some of his tutors had taught him this art. But at this time in his life he was still not willing to write only for the Church.

His will to succeed far out-weighed his desire to please Port-Royal, so he continued with his career. He found himself very much in debt to Nicolas Vitart and it was hoped that his next move, to Uzès, in the southern part of France, would secure him a church post and enable him to repay his debts, even if it meant his entering the minor orders of the church. He discovered,

while leading a dull life, that a religious vocation was not the life for him. This was his second chance to redeem himself and admit to those at Port-Royal that he was to write for them. At this point Racine was struggling toward success. He had no knowledge of his destiny; only his characters were aware of their destiny. He also discovered that it was not only the clergy which he disliked, but also the Southerners with their narrow minds. During his stay in the South, he discovered that he was losing his faith and rebelled against the structures of the Port-Royal way of life.

He decided to return to Paris even though his debts remained. Here he would obtain some sort of pension. In Paris he tried several times to get a good pension from the king or one of his ministers, but was unable to win one. However, he did succeed in winning Monsieur le Conte de Saint-Aignan. He soon discovered that he had not only acquired his benefactor, but also a true friend in Nicolas Boileau. This man of keen wit and broad knowledge was to be Racine's source of advice and encouragement for the rest of his days. Now the world was ready for him and he for the world.

He had a great interest in self-knowledge and showed this by writing plays with characters who did or did not acquire their self-knowledge through a long painful struggle. He finished his first tragedy La Thébaïde Ou Les Frères Ennemis. After this play, eleven other plays were written, and in 1673 Racine had a great honor bestowed on him. He was elected to the Académie Française.

This was not only a great honor in itself but also bestowed on him an official patronage of the king. Not long after that, Racine was honored again, this time with an appointment as treasurer of France at Moulins, entitling him to the title "Chevalier" which he never used, and an assured income.

Phèdre was to be the last play that Racine wrote for some ten years. This play seemed to strike even the people that educated him and they wrote Racine to let him know of their displeasure. The incest was just too much for them to accept. Their opinion hurt Racine as much as his play hurt his friends and at the very height of his career he retired.

After retiring from writing, he was offered a position as Royal Historiographer jointly with Boileau. It was just prior to his confirmation that Racine chose to be married to Catherine de Romanet, who was twelve years younger than he. The wedding took place in 1677, and was a great social event in Paris. This and the peace made by Racine with Port-Royal marked a turning point in his life. They subsequently had seven children. One married and had children, four became nuns and the remaining two sons were to stay unmarried. Racine lived a relatively quiet life when not busy with his duties as historiographer.

It was not until 1689 that Racine wrote another play. Madame de Maintenon asked him to write a biblical play: Esther. In 1691, at the suggestion of the king, he wrote his last play entitled Athalie. He loved to write, and did so, but only for and about his church.

He spent his remaining years writing the history of Port-Royal. He died in Paris in 1699 and was buried in Port-Royal by the grave of one of his tutors, Hamon, who had taught him Greek.

## RACINE'S DEBUT

It is interesting to note that during the time that Racine wrote La Thébaïde ou Les Frères Ennemis he was silent as to its progress. This is very probably due to the fact that he did not want to antagonize the Scorin family with whom Marie was still living, the fathers at Port-Royal, or his grandmother, whose death on August 12, 1663, removed another link of his childhood. He loved all of these people and was well aware of their opinion of his literary career and it was for this reason he was silent.

It is very possible that Racine was very concerned with his situation with Port-Royal. He, however, made his decision to give his play to Molière. The first performance was given on June 12, 1664, and was dedicated to Monsieur le Comte de Saint-Aignan. It was considered to be a failure for it was performed only seventeen times.

La Thébaïde takes place in a room in the palace at Thebes. During the first three scenes the reader is familiarized with the characters and is introduced to the fact that Jocaste is not only the mother of the King Etéocle, Polinice and Antigone, but also the mother of Oedipus, her husband. With this knowledge the reader already can see that problems will ensue. Etéocle develops this knowledge to foresee what is bound by oracle, or by fate, to happen to him. For the oracle says:

Thébains, pour n'avoir plus de guerres,  
Il faut, par un ordre fatal,  
Que le dernier du sang royal

Par son trépas ensanglante vos terres.<sup>1</sup>  
Page 18, Act II, Scene 2.

Etéocle and Polinice hate each other, and this hate is intensified by the fact that their father willed them to rule the throne during alternate years.

One also learns that these two brothers are not ordinary brothers, but are indeed identical twins. However, their beliefs differ greatly. One of the differences is that Etéocle believes in popular suffrage, and Polinice believes in divine right. It is not just recently that they have been fighting over the rulership of the Kingdom, but their hate for one another began in the womb of their mother.

One also sees that Etéocle thinks this is to be a predestined doom for him. He has known for some time that he was to die, and nothing can stop the oracle from becoming reality. The pressure of this fate frequently reveals a new aspect of the character.

Jocaste tries to prevent this terrible fight from occurring and says to Etéocle:

Je suis de tous les deux la commune ennemie,  
Puisque votre ennemi reçut de moi la vie;  
Cet ennemi, sans moi, ne verrait pas le jour.  
S'il meurt, ne faut-il pas que je meure à mon tour?  
N'en doutez point, sa mort me doit être commune;  
Il faut en donner deux, ou n'en donner pas une;  
Et, sans être ni doux ni cruels à demi,  
Il faut me perdre, ou bien sauver votre ennemi.

Page 40, Act IV, Scene 3.

Etéocle realizes that only one can rule, however.

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<sup>1</sup>Jean Racine, *Théâtre Complet*. (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1960). All subsequent references will be to this edition and all page, act and scene numbers will follow the quotes.

Jamais dessus le trône on ne vit plus d'un maître...  
Page 43, Act IV, Scene 3.

Jocaste therefore decides that since they were going to kill each other she would go first and show them the road to death. Love is important in most tragedies, but here all the bloodshed is caused by hatred and lust.

In fulfillment of the oracle, Etéocle and Polinice kill each other in combat; but first they kill Hémon, their sister's lover. When news of Hémon's death reaches Antigone, she kills herself with the same dagger that killed her mother.

All of the characters who ended their lives so dreadfully were well aware of the prophecy of the oracle. Each character's method of dealing with the prophecy was truly quite different for they each believed that through some miracle they would be spared from their fate. Even Créon thought that he had outsmarted the oracle when he says:

Parle-moi de régner, parle-moi d'Antigone;  
J'aurai bientôt son coeur, et j'ai déjà le trône.  
Tout ce qui s'est passé n'est qu'un songe pour moi:  
J'étais père et sujet, je suis amant et roi,  
La princesse et le trône ont pour moi tant de charmes...  
Page 53, Act V, Scene 4.

He feels no pain or sorrow for what has happened, just joy, for he thinks that he has gotten Antigone for his princess and that now all that he has dreamt of will come true. He will be king.

In the end, all must resign themselves to their destiny, for destiny rules all. And Créon, upon learning of the death of Antigone, also dies, thus completing the full cycle of the oracle.

Since this is Racine's first play, his characters are not too complex, nor are they too difficult for the reader to understand. It is evident that Racine has intended for several of his characters to have self-knowledge. He wants us to know that they are struggling against their respective destinies to try and overcome that which they knew they could not overcome. This is a true tragedy. As in Aristotle's dictum, Racine arouses terror and pity for his characters.

This idea appears in several characters. The most important of these characters is the King of Thebes, Etéocle. Throughout the entire play he has his own innate knowledge which he continuously develops to fruition by which he knows his eventual destination and his reason for that direction. Since before birth, he and his brother had fought and he knows that he has to fight for what he believes in, even though this means, as the oracle says, to the death.

Polinice, too, is a tragic hero who has a self-knowledge. He knows that to attain what one wants, one must fight for it, and to the point of death he does this.

Antigone realizes this also when she says:

La mort seule entre vous pouvait mettre la paix.  
 Le trône pour vous deux avait trop peu de place;  
 Il fallait entre vous mettre un plus grand espace,  
 Et que le ciel vous mît, pour finir vos discords,  
 L'un parmi les vivants, l'autre parmi les morts.  
 Infortunés tous deux, dignes qu'on vous déplore!  
 Moins malheureux pourtant que je ne suis encore,  
 Puisque de tous les maux qui sont tombés sur vous,  
 Vous n'en sentez aucun, et que je les sens tous!

Page 46, Act V, Scene 2.



She herself is not as tragic a heroine as her brothers, for when she kills herself she does not do so as a duty, but as a means of escape. She is sorry that she is alive when all dear to her are dead. She is to be pitied, but a tragic sorrow is to be reserved for the brothers.

There is a great deal of tension in this play between the character's fate and their self-knowledge. The characters are not complicated; however, they are true tragic heroes because they go to their destiny with completed self-knowledge. Etéocle, even with his self-knowledge, has to fight, for his beliefs are more important to him than his destiny. Polinice also has to fight for his beliefs. They have both, unlike Antigone, painfully attained their self-knowledge and therefore have become tragic heroes.

The next product of the neophyte playwright Racine was Alexandre Le Grand (1665). Molière's troupe received the script for this play first; however, the unscrupulous climber, Racine, less than one week after Molière produced this play, gave it to the Hôtel de Bourgogne. It is said that he was unhappy with the manner in which Molière was producing his play.

In Alexandre Le Grand, Racine used for the second time a story from Quintus Curtius.

Many years ago Cléofile, an Indian princess, has fallen in love with Alexandre while she was his prisoner. As the play opens we learn that Alexandre is now preparing to invade India. Taxile, the brother of Cléofile, and his sister are talking. He

thinks that he should fight Alexandre. He is trying to follow the path that has been laid out for him. For this should be done not only for his sake but for his people, and of course, this would aid him in the eyes of his love, Axiane, who would most certainly want him to be brave and to fight.

Cléofile tries to persuade him that Axiane has eyes only for Porus, another Indian king, and that she is only leading him on. Cléofile finally persuades her brother to ally himself with Alexandre, for, after all, that is not a sign of cowardice, but merely insight. Cléofile continues her life without concern as to her destination or the eventual consequences.

From this moment on, the reader must wonder whether or not Taxile, who has been coerced into doing that which he knows to be wrong, is doomed. Does he have the self-knowledge of the Theban brothers? Does he know of his fatal end?

Cléofile looks only for the easiest road, and tries to convince Axiane that under the shelter of Alexandre she would be far safer than anywhere else when she tells her:

De quel autre côté conduiriez-vous vos pas?  
Où pourriez-vous ailleurs éviter la tempête?  
Un plein calme en ces lieux assure votre tête:  
Tout est tranquille . . .

Page 83, Act III, Scene 1.

The more Axiane talks, the more certain, one becomes that she does not love Taxile. But Taxile gives up, as he says to Cléofile of his fate:

Ma soeur: de votre sort je vous laisse l'empire;  
Je vous confie encor la conduite du mien.

Page 87, Act III, Scene 3.

This is a mistake on his part, for everyone is responsible for his own life, and to put it into another's hands is sheer disaster.

Racine has further developed his characters, for Alexandre is not a simple character, such as Etéocle or Polinice. The Theban brothers are so engulfed in their hatred for each other that they have no time to focus on other characters. A double force activates Alexandre's movements; first, and most important, is his conquest of wars, and second is his love.

In this play, as in all Racine's plays, love and war are synonymous. This is very evident when, even as he is professing his love for Cléofile, he reverts to what he will do for her through his acts of aggression.

Maintenant que mon bras, engagé sous vos lois,  
Doit soutenir mon nom et le vôtre à la fois,  
J'irai rendre fameux, par l'éclat de la guerre,  
Des peuples inconnus au reste de la terre,  
Et vous faire dresser des autels en des lieux  
Où leurs sauvages mains en refusent aux dieux.

Page 90, Act III, Scene 6.

He speaks of her as though she were a piece of land. Now it becomes plain to Cléofile the state in which she has placed herself and her brother; and she says:

Oui, vous y traînez la victoire captive;  
Mais je doute, seigneur, que l'amour vous y suive.  
Tant d'états, tant de mers, qui vont nous désunir  
M'effaceront bientôt de votre souvenir.

Page 90, ACT III, Scene 6.

Love is forbidden - it is her downfall.

In Alexandre Le Grand, love plays an important role. The fate of Taxile finally becomes clear. Axiane starts to speak to him softly, and it ends with Cléofile relating to him that Porus

is not truly dead. After just receiving Axiane's promise of love, he could not take this news. He is very upset when he says:

Quoi! la fortune, obstinée à me nuire,  
Ressuscite un rival armé pour me détruire!

Page 100, Act IV, Scene 5.

At that point, he leaves to fight Porus. Here again love is the overpowering downfall, the forbidden fruit. He resigns himself to his destiny to gain Axiane's love. It becomes apparent at this point that he does know himself, and that in order to redeem himself he must fight Porus. He realizes that he may well die, but wouldn't he already be dead in spirit if he does not fight and Porus regains the love of Axiane?

The last part of the play may seem unimportant, but even though we know by now that Taxile is dead, it is an important part of the nucleus. Alexandre pardons Axiane and Porus. Cléofile is deeply troubled by this and contents herself with being silent, for she sees the trouble that her love has brought her.

Racine has two completely opposite characters in this play. Cléofile goes throughout the entire play with no self-knowledge, letting fate lead her through life. Taxile, on the other hand, is at first led by his sister, but comes to understand himself and realizes what life has in store for him. He is then forced to break away and accomplish that which destiny has in store for him. His awareness is not as in-depth as that of the Theban brothers, but he has the need to know. The outside circumstances, his sister and the war, do not determine his destiny. Taxile is weak and he himself, from the beginning, attempts to control his

destiny by trying to avoid the factors and struggling against what he knows will eventually happen. It appears that the true tragedy here is self-knowledge. Sympathy is felt for Taxile more than for Cléofile, because he realizes what is to happen, and why, before his death, and Cléofile is unaware of what was happening almost until the end. Racine does not make life easy for each character, especially if the character is aware of what life is and undergoes a struggle. His awareness leads to true tragedy, making him a completed character.

## BREAK WITH PORT-ROYAL

The real break with Port-Royal came with the completion of Andromaque, for Racine received a letter from his Aunt saying that if he intended to continue this profession he need not write or come to see her again. He clarified the break when he wrote a letter expressing his conviction that Jansenism was on the decline.

Andromaque was performed in Mme. de Maintenon's apartments on November 17, 1677, and several days later at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. This play, one of the more Aristotelian in nature, is usually considered among the tragedies that Racine adapted from Greek drama. The playwright points out in his preface that the only aspect taken from Euripides was the portrait of Hermione. The remainder was suggested by a passage from Virgil's Aeneid (book III).

Andromaque takes place in a chamber in Pyrrhus' palace. The basic framework of the play is a chain of lovers (this itself could be a downfall in a Racine play): Oreste loves Hermione, who in turn loves Pyrrhus, who loves Andromaque, who loves her dead husband, Hector.

As the play opens, we learn that Pyrrhus would like to marry Andromaque, his prisoner. However, several obstacles are in his path: first, Andromaque, still in love with the memory of her dead husband, thinks of raising her only living memory of Hector, their son Astyanax. Second, Hermione was sent to court to be wed to Pyrrhus.

The Greeks fear that one day Astyanax will try to rebuild

Troy, so they send Oreste to ask for his death. Pyrrhus decides to use this as a means of forcing Andromaque to make a decision.

Hermione informs Oreste, who has always loved her, that she will leave with him if Pyrrhus marries Andromaque. But Pyrrhus informs Oreste that he will take Hermione as his bride, because he is angered with Andromaque. At this point the reader can clearly see that Pyrrhus has no self-knowledge and that his revenge will get him nowhere.

Andromaque goes to Hermione and pleads with her to have Pyrrhus forgive her and send her and Astyanax to a faraway place. Hermione has no compassion and really causes her own problems via the lack of self-knowledge. Unfortunately for Hermione, who rebuffs the grief-stricken mother, she gives Andromaque the first clue as to what she would have to do to save her son when she says:

S'il faut fléchir Pyrrhus, qui le peut mieux que vous?  
 Vos yeux assez longtemps ont régné sur son âme;  
 Faites-le prononcer: j'y souscrirai, madame.  
 Page 146, Act III, Scene 4.

This is the beginning of Hermione's downfall. Andromaque throws herself at the feet of Pyrrhus to plead as she has never done before for her son. When Pyrrhus tells her that it is too late, however, she begins skillfully to build her case by saying:

Allons rejoindre mon époux.  
 Page 148, Act III, Scene 6.

Pyrrhus is astonished by the kind words of Andromaque and after he dismisses Phoenix, he renews his quest of Andromaque, utilizing her concern for her son. He tells her that she must

make up her own mind because he will now either crown her his queen or slaughter her son before her very eyes. Andromaque tells Céphise what is to happen, and she, with her woman's intuition, tells her not to worry, for she is sure that Andromaque will be the next "maîtresse" of Greece. She goes to Hector's tomb before telling Pyrrhus her decision. It is here and only here that Andromaque loses her composure. But she knows what must be done. Andromaque is definitely aware. Andromaque decides to marry Pyrrhus, but she then lets us know that she has no intention of consummating this marriage and intends to commit suicide immediately after the ceremony, when she says to Pyrrhus:

Pyrrhus en m'épousant s'en déclare l'appui;  
Il suffit: je veux bien m'en reposer sur lui.  
Page 153, Act IV, Scene 1.

This self-knowledge, to plan her own fate, seems at this point to be the true tragedy, for she knows what is in store for her. Hermione then promises to marry Oreste if he kills the monarch. She believes that he will do this because of his love for her.

Andromaque marries Pyrrhus. However, she doesn't have to kill herself in order to remain true to Hector, for Pyrrhus is killed by Oreste. When Oreste tells Hermione that he has killed Pyrrhus, her grief is consummate. She denounces Oreste for not only cowardice, but also savagery, and disavows her pledge to be his. She attacks him even further by saying:

Ah! fallait-il en croire une amante insensée?  
Ne devais-tu pas lire au fond de ma pensée?  
Page 168, Act V, Scene 3.



Oreste is beside himself with remorse, and when Pylade comes to say that they must escape, he replies:

Non, non, c'est Hermione, amis, que je veux suivre:  
 A son dernier arrêt je ne puis plus survivre.  
 Partez: j'ai fait le crime, et je vais l'expier.  
 Page 169, Avt V, Scene 5.

When he learns that Hermione stabbed herself over the corpse of Pyrrhus, Oreste goes mad because his reason for being has ceased, and since Andromaque has pledged to find the slayers, they leave quickly. Oreste being without self-knowledge reacts spontaneously to what people tell him to do; Acting without self-knowledge, especially because of love, proves to be fatal. Hermione is also weak and cannot have self-knowledge because to have it one must be aware of what is going on around them, and react not just egotistically but with some responsibility.

The entire play is centered around love of different types: some accepted, some rejected. In each play the characters have developed little by little. They are no longer the simple, easy to analyze characters as were found in La Thébaidé, but are now much more complex. In this play, Racine has blinded the lovers from knowing their fate, and given self-knowledge to those who stay clear-headed and keep their wits. This play is very realistic. It is passionate for some characters who are unaware but logically controlled by characters who have self-knowledge.

Pyrrhus is a different character altogether. He is a stable king when it comes to the wars and problems of the kingdom, but when it comes to his own life, he is very unstable. He does not

have the self-knowledge that Andromaque has. He does not know where he is going or why. He just exists. His life ends tragically for he lets his love rule his soul and not his mind. Therefore, he does not do well for he never assumes any personal responsibility. Upon his death the feeling of pity surfaces, but no real tragedy is seen in his death, for in a true tragedy the character must have self-knowledge. Self-knowledge always intensifies and at times is a necessary condition for tragedy.

Hermione is a very weak character who needs someone strong to guide her. Oreste is willing to do this, but he too is weak and when he obeys what she blindly tells him to do, then he, too, is doomed.

Racine does not let Oreste kill himself or be killed because in a tragic play the tragic effects must happen to someone strong enough to defend himself. Oreste does not fit this mold. However, the reader is well aware of Oreste's fate for he is destined to kill his mother and Aegesther. There is an irony here in that the reader knows what Oreste's fate will be, while he is unaware of it. The personality of Oreste has never fully developed, and he lets Hermione control him. Oreste has no self-knowledge and his character seems far removed from the Oreste who will avenge his father's death. The seeds of the act must, without his awareness, be in him somewhere. Oreste still has life and this means that he can still slowly work toward self-knowledge. For it is possible that this painful experience has taught him a great deal about life and himself.

The only character who had the self-knowledge and the strength to help herself is Andromaque. In this play her situation is tragic. However, she knows how to cope with this situation and never loses this ability except when she breaks down at the tomb of Hector. But she is able to pull herself back together and continue. She has eyes and true love only for her deceased husband, Hector, and is determined to remain so. But when the king tells her of his doom and Hermione refuses to give her help, Andromaque realizes her duty. Andromaque has enough strength of character to plan her own death, but she is saved by the fate which ordained the death of Pyrrhus. Andromaque is the only character in the play who is not involved emotionally and this is to her advantage. She arrives victorious because she is the mistress of her emotions.

The tragedy does not always have to end with death, as it has in the other plays. In a tragedy, death is not mandatory, but knowledge or feeling is necessary. Here Andromaque is a tragic heroine even though she survives, thus avoiding the doom which she herself had arranged.

## ASSAULT ON LOVE

Britannicus is dedicated to the Duc de Chevreuse, who belonged to one of the most powerful of French families. Its first performance was on December 13, 1669, but it had to be carried on without Racine's favorite actress, for Marquise Duparc died in December of the preceding year.

Britannicus takes place in Néron's palace. The tension is great during the play because it is built around family members, mother and son. Even though the name of the play indicates the hero, most of the play deals with the absurdity and tyranny of Néron.

From the beginning, one is conscious of the jealousy or resentment that Agrippine has for her son, and her son for her. She implies that Néron owes her the right to see him, and that he should not forget who she is and how he got to the throne. He, on the other hand, has a definite Oedipus complex involving Agrippine.

As in La Thébaidé, we are made aware of an omen in the early part of the play. The astrologers foretell that Néron would become emperor, but that he would kill his mother. At the time of the revelation, the thought of death was unimportant as long as her son became emperor. Agrippine has knowledge of her fatal destiny but she does not really believe the prediction, or at least she does not act as though she does. Agrippine is fighting against her destiny and self-knowledge.

Néron's latest venture is to kidnap Junie, who is the promised

bride of his half brother, Britannicus. Agrippine is against Neron's plan, for she has given her blessing in marriage and she fears that people might think she has little or no power.

There is a counter agent in this play : Narcisse. As soon as he and Britannicus speak of trusting Agrippine, he runs to Néron to tell of his mother's siding with Britannicus, and as a result, Néron is filled with jealousy when he discovers the deep love that Junie and Britannicus have for each other. He has fallen in love and plans to divorce his wife in order to marry Junie. Actually he is really not in love with Junie, probably not even infatuated with her, only jealous of his half brother's love for her and her return of that love. There is a great sibling rivalry here involving Britannicus. At that point, he tells Junie that he is the only one who can dictate who her husband shall be. Néron orders Junie to tell her lover that she no longer loves him.

Junie skillfully carries out her dreadful task of attempting to warn her lover when she says:

Vous êtes en des lieux tout pleins de sa puissance:  
Ces murs mêmes, seigneur, peuvent avoir des yeux;  
Et jamais l'empereur n'est absent de ces lieux.  
Page 260, Act II, Scene 6.

However, Britannicus does not understand and leaves broken-hearted.

Néron asserts himself and starts acting without first asking advice from his tutor. He is doing alright as long as he is dependent on someone else but he is not yet ready to be independent. Burrhus now wonders what monster he has created. Agrippine, too,

is upset with these events, but not for the same reasons.

Bientôt, si je ne romps ce funeste lien,  
 Ma place est occupée, et je ne suis plus rien.  
 Jusqu'ici d'un vain titre Octavie honorée,  
 Inutile à la cour, en était ignorée:  
 Les grâces, les honneurs par moi seule versés,  
 M'attiraient des mortels les vœux intéressés.  
 Une autre de César a surpris la tendresse:  
 Elle aura le pouvoir d'épouse et de maîtresse...

Page 265, Act III, Scene 4.

Consequently she decides to join forces with Britannicus. As they leave, Junie and Britannicus meet and Junie tells him of the lies, which were necessary, since Néron was present. Néron interrupts the lovers and has Britannicus arrested, and his mother and Junie are made virtual prisoners in the palace.

The deception of Néron becomes clear. Even when he asks Agrippine what she wants him to do, a question which she leads him into asking, she answers:

De mes accusateurs qu'on punisse l'audace;  
 Que de Britannicus on calme le courroux;  
 Que Junie à son choix puisse prendre un époux;  
 Qu'ils soient libres tous deux, et que Pallas demeure;  
 Que vous me permettiez de vous voir à toute heure;  
 Que ce même Burrhus, qui nous vient écouter,  
 A votre porte enfin n'ose plus m'arrêter.

Page 278, Act IV, Scene 2.

He then assures her that all will become fact, when in reality he has no intention whatsoever of honoring his assurances. There are two forces working on Néron: first Burrhus and then Narcisse. He admits that he is going to have Britannicus killed. Burrhus tries to dissuade him and Narcisse encourages him. Burrhus has self-knowledge and can see what Néron is doomed if he continues in this vein. Narcisse only thinks one step at a time and does not see the consequences.

Britannicus tells Junie of his joy upon learning that Néron will publicly bless their marriage. Junie implores her fiancé not to leave her sight and not to trust anyone. Britannicus leaves for an audience with Néron, and Junie and Agrippine are left together. Junie tells Agrippine of her fears, and Agrippine assures her of Néron's sincere promises. But Junie has self-knowledge and can see what is about to happen.

Britannicus would have done well to heed Junie's warning for he is now dead. Junie escapes and is able to gain entrance to the temple of the Vestal Virgins. Narcisse, in an attempt to gain praise, attempts to stop her and is killed. Néron is on the verge of madness. Albine comes to ask for the aid of Agrippine and Burrhus for their grief-stricken emperor.

This play could be viewed as an assault on love. During the time that Racine was writing this play he was deeply moved by the death of his Marquise Duparc, and in his return he assaults all other lovers.

Néron is really not a fully developed character. This is apparent from the beginning. At first, he has to have advice from his council and even, as Racine says, in his second preface to the play, "En un mot, c'est ici un monstre naissant, mais qui n'ose encore se déclarer, et qui cherche des couleurs à ses méchantes actions..."<sup>2</sup> The corruption of absolute power becomes the tragic progression of the play. Not a hair turns on Néron's head

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<sup>2</sup>Jean Racine, *Théâtre Complet*, "Britannicus" (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1960), page 236.

when Britannicus and Narcisse are killed for he is concerned only with his desires and not with the events going on around him. There are two very evident forces acting on Néron: the Oedipus complex involving Agrippine and the sibling rivalry involving Britannicus. Both are very powerful psychological forces acting on Néron, but he is never really aware of either. His ignorance of, or refusal to admit these factors constitutes a definite lack of self-knowledge.

The play ends with promise for Néron, for Agrippine hopes that he will gain some sort of self-knowledge from his mistakes, but from what Burrhus says, we feel that he is doomed because he is not limited to this one crime.

Agrippine has self-knowledge but she acts through jealousy alone. Her son is the only way for her to gain importance. Although the astrologers tell her that someday she would be killed by her son, if he were to become Emperor, she pays them no heed. Important to her is the throne. Racine gives her the ability to foresee what might happen to her through her self-knowledge but in spite of that she does not use it, her mind too full of self-glory and self-importance.

Britannicus is probably envisioned by Racine as a tragic protagonist. Britannicus believes that Néron is going to keep his word; hence, he goes to his death. He goes with no knowledge of what is to happen to him. Although the play carries his name, he dies with no self-knowledge and is not the true tragic hero. For to have self-knowledge one must possess foresight and



awareness, and he has neither. It is quite possible that since Néron and Britannicus are half-brothers one got all the good qualities, Britannicus, and the other got all the bad qualities, Néron. In ordering the death of his half-brother, Néron was perhaps killing his better self or his alter-ego.

Junie is a very wise character. From the moment that she is captured, it is evident that she is in love, not a lustful or unreturned love, but one that is blessed and returned. Racine gives her the foresight to understand Néron's false acts. She tries to warn Britannicus, but his love overshadows his mind. Junie knows herself and knows what she must do to escape Néron, so she takes shelter with the Vestal Virgins. Her self-knowledge is a true tragedy, for she has the knowledge to know what is going to happen to Britannicus and what her fate is to be.

## DEFEAT OF LOVE

Bérénice was first performed on November 21, 1670. The defeat of love is present in the play as well as in the life of Racine. Now that Marquise Duparc has been dead for some time, Racine has to relinquish his love for her and find another actress to take her place. This was accomplished when he found La Champmeslé, who appeared for the first time for Racine in the play Bérénice. Racine had to spend many hours at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in order to teach her the part, for it was said that her memory was horrible; however, when he was finished and the curtain rose for the first performance, it was as if she had been created expressly to portray Racine's character.

The play takes place in Rome, in the vestibule between the apartments of Titus and Bérénice. Antiochus has decided to leave Rome, for after having been secretly in love with Bérénice for five years he cannot stay and see her wed to Titus. He asks for a private audience with her and decides to tell her of his love and then leave. Bérénice is surprised by his proclamation but is too preoccupied with the fact that Titus has been avoiding her to pay too much attention to him. Phénice, the lady-in-waiting to Bérénice, warns of the forthcoming event when she says:

Titus n'a point encore expliqué sa pensée.  
Rome vous voit, madame, avec des yeux jaloux;  
La rigueur de ses lois m'épouvante pour vous:  
L'hymen chez les Romains n'admet qu'une Romaine;  
Rome hait tous les rois; et Bérénice est reine.

Page 312, Act I, Scene 5.

But Bérénice is not, as of yet, interested in accepting this, for

she has only love and no foresight.

The next time that Titus sees Bérénice he tries to tell her what his self-knowledge had made him decide, but the words just will not come out. All he can say is:

Rome...l'empire....

Page 322, Act II, Scene 4.

He does not want to hurt Bérénice, and this is a large factor in his inability to speak. Titus has the self-knowledge to know his duty and this is why he is able to overcome his love for Bérénice.

The Emperor implores Antiochus to do his deed. Antiochus is torn between the hope that this might make Bérénice love him and the reality that she will hate him.

Antiochus is correct, for Bérénice is not at all pleased with his news; in fact, she cannot believe him.

Bérénice must see Titus to be sure that what she has heard is true, and she is given an audience with him. Titus is very upset but he knows that this is the way it must be. He finally says what is so very hard for him to express in her presence:

N'accablez point, madame, un prince malheureux.  
 Il ne faut point ici nous attendrir tous deux.  
 Un trouble assez cruel m'agite et me dévore,  
 Sans que des pleurs si chers me déchirent encore.  
 Rappelez bien plutôt ce coeur qui, tant de fois,  
 M'a fait de mon devoir reconnaître la voix...

Page 336, Act IV, Scene 5.

Titus still has a small hope that Bérénice will marry him for perhaps Rome might change its law, but past history is

contrary to this possibility. Bérénice, who thus far has not been able to have self-knowledge, cannot see why he is not able either to change the law or to go against it. Bérénice can see that he will not change so perhaps she can just stay for his company. Titus, however, quickly turns this idea down for this would be unbearable for him. Bérénice is very upset and even threatens to kill herself. Titus is so much in love with her that without thinking he says to Paulin that he will never live if she carries out her threat; however, it is always apparent that his inner self will not let this happen.

Even as he declares his unending love, Rome calls him and he faithfully goes to his first duty, as he says:

Il suffit, Paulin, nous allons les entendre.  
 Prince, de ce devoir je ne puis me défendre.  
 Voyez la reine. Allez. J'espère, à mon retour,  
 Qu'elle ne pourra plus douter de mon amour.  
 Page 342, Act IV, Scene 7.

Titus cannot face the departure of Bérénice and is superficially prepared to give up all and go against all the laws. Bérénice does not even give him a chance to express what he wants to say, for she now understands that he does indeed love her, but that he has to take his duty over love. She also hopes that Antiochus understands her position. The play ends on a hopeful tone when she says:

Adieu. Servons tous trois d'exemple à l'univers  
 De l'amour la plus tendre et la plus meilleure  
 Dont il puisse garder l'histoire douloureuse.  
 Page 350, Act V, Scene 7.

In the preface of Bérénice Racine says, "Il y avait longtemps que je voulais essayer si je pourrais faire une tragédie

avec cette simplicité d'action qui a été si fort du goût des anciens..."<sup>3</sup> He not only succeeds in creating a great play but does so without the necessity of death.

This play does not have to be labeled a tragedy. Bérénice is a true example of Racine's true hero, one who has love placed in his path as an obstacle, but is able to overcome it and reach the goal of duty over love by his own self-knowledge.

The young Titus is not shown in the play, but it is known that he had his frivolous days of loving Bérénice without taking into consideration that he could never marry a queen. During the play Titus is aware of his duty. He has the self-knowledge to realize that he must pick duty over love, and this is evident from the very beginning of the play. He also knows that Bérénice will not really admire him if he does not do his duty. He must take his noble path and renounce his love.

Antiochus, too, has the self-knowledge to see his destiny. He too must give up Bérénice, a love that is very dear to him. Even though his love is unreturned she is very important to him, and he always keeps secretly the hope that she will come to him. It is not until Titus talks of marriage that he finally relinquishes the idea of her love entirely. He, too, must return to his country, free from self-doubts and able to accept his new life.

Bérénice does not have self-knowledge from the beginning,

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<sup>3</sup>Jean Racine, Théâtre Complet, "Bérénice" (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1960), page 299.

as do her two gentlemen friends. At first she is concerned only with her own frivolous ideas. It is not until late in the play that she realizes that Titus is right and that he must choose duty over their love. At the end she is well aware that Antiochus is in love with her, but she knows she is not in love with him. She must return to her home without marriage to Titus. It is Titus who helps her mature to her self-knowledge and responsibility and renounce her love.

In the play all the characters are pictured in the beginning in a fairyland atmosphere. But all three are able to grow and to understand that they have to overcome this great obstacle that has been placed before them--love. To overcome this means that they are able to attain self-knowledge and are now able to set out in life and conquer all of its difficulties:

## CONCLUSION

All of the plays that Racine wrote have attained the secret of drama: TENSION. There is no element of surprise however, for in his plays he lets the reader know what he needs to know only when this knowledge is needed. He has a great power of words, some uttered and others withheld.

The preceding plays have one of two common bonds: love or hate, either of which stems from lust.

La Thébaine is a good example of hate being the common bond between Etéocle and Polinice. The brothers know, by oracle, that they are predestined and they know why their destiny has been foretold. Etéocle has the self-knowledge, and he also has a desire for the throne and hate for his brother. These factors are far more important to him than anything else. Polinice, too, is full of hate for his brother and has a desire for the throne which, in his opinion, is rightfully his. They both have self-knowledge and know what is going to happen to them if they fight one another. Here, as with Agrippine, Etéocle and Polinice do not accept the oracle. They both are fighting against what is going to become fact. They attain a true tragedy for they know where their battle will lead.

The remainder of the plays discussed deal with love. Love in the Racinian plays, in most cases, is forbidden. It glitters, it is a lustful love, the hero or heroine struggles with it, and he or she is overpowered by it so much that the character either does not see soon enough, or never, his or her self-knowledge.

In Alexandre Le Grand, Cléofile is so full of love that she does not see, until after the fact, that she is destined to lead her brother to doom. Taxile breaks away from his sister and attains the self-knowledge of a developed character, and it is truly a tragedy for he knows what he has to do and that he will probably die doing it.

In Andromaque, the forbidden love blinds Pyrrhus, Hermione and Oreste. Their love is either lustful or unreturned. Their destiny is not a true tragedy because not being fully developed characters they are only helpless victims of violent passion. However Andromaque is a developed character and, realizing her duty, she has to map out her death to save her son's life. She is a true tragic heroine, for she is able to overcome her human emotions and do what is necessary.

Britannicus lives and dies with no self-knowledge but still is the tragic protagonist. Agrippine is too full of lust to use self-knowledge. Agrippine is not to be pitied for she knows well what is to happen to her and yet she does not believe the oracle, but only fights against it. Néron is not able to overcome love, or what to him seems like love, for his sibling rivalry foreshadows his ability to attain self-knowledge. It is only in attaining self-knowledge that there can be a true tragedy. Junie alone, in Britannicus, uses self-knowledge to see what she should do and not what she necessarily wants to do. Her self-knowledge, even if it does not lead to death, is true tragedy. For she has to live with the memory of the death of her loved one.



In Bérénice, three of the characters have self-knowledge, Titus, Antiochus and Bérénice. They see their duty and follow it. Racine is able to attain a true tragedy through self-knowledge in several ways, some ending in death and others not ending in death. All three characters are mature and aware of what is to happen to them. Their maturity does not depend on outside circumstances but on their self-knowledge and ability to overcome their emotions.

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## VITA

Mary Louise Olsen Cariens was born on December 3, 1947 in Evansville, Indiana. In the eighth grade she attended school at the Collège de Jésus--Marie de Sillery in Quebec, Canada after which she went to Nazareth Academy in Nazareth, Kentucky for her high school education. For the next three years she attended schools in Europe. In Switzerland she attended school for two and one-half years at the Pensionnat du Sacré-Coeur in Saint Maurice. Then for the next year she lived in Madrid, Spain and attended the Colegio de Santa Maria del Camino. When returning to Evansville she finished college at the University of Evansville with a major in French, a minor in Spanish, and a secondary education license. After receiving her Bachelor of Arts degree she taught French at Harrison High School for one year. She then moved to Richmond, Virginia to obtain her Masters in French from the University of Richmond. In December of that year she was married to Richard Thomas Cariens. Since then she has returned to Evansville and teaches French and Spanish at Harrison High School. She has one child, Richard Thomas Cariens, Jr., now four and one-half years of age.